

BY A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

NEW WINGS

Illustrated by Pat Davis

It's "any port in a storm," but if the port's too harsh, the refugees may never quite get the courage to try again for another port—

It was an hour before sunrise.

The sky was black, the stars were very bright. And there were two moons—one, high in the east, climbing the last few degrees of arc to the meridian, the other lifting rapidly from the western horizon. The reflected light of the satellites glittered from tiny crystals in the rocks, in the sand. They looked like frost, but they were not. Frost was found only in the immediate vicinity of the canals.

Low on the northern horizon glimmered the dim lights of the city. They hung there, between the dark, featureless desert and the black, star-scintillant sky, a reproach, eloquent witness to the carelessness of the man who should have switched them off on leaving. They were wasting precious power. For all the people of the city were here, out in the desert. Dim, amorphous shapes they were, huddled in their thick clothing, their oxygen helmets making their heads look abnormally large. They were staring up at what seemed to be a tower. From the rounded top of it, perhaps a thousand feet uplifted in the thin air, polished glass threw back the shifting light of the two moons. At its base were what looked like four huge buttresses, one of them badly crumpled.

The Morning Star came up in the east, blazing brightly and ruddily. And in its wake came the first, faint flush of dawn. The people turned to stare at the luridly effulgent planet. There was a low, faint muttering.

Another star, shining whitely, not so bright, lifted over the undulations of the desert horizon. It was Venus. Then the sun came up. The burnished metal of the tower blazed dazingly in the level light of the first rays. Some of the people shielded their eyes. A door opened in the side of the tower, well up, above the buttresses. The Keeper of the Ship stood in the doorway. He slowly raised his right hand in salutation to the people.

It was the Morning of the Anniversary.

The Keeper of the Ship spoke. His voice was muffled by his helmet, faint in the attenuated air. Had it not been for the microphone, the amplifiers, the battery of loud- speakers, he would have been inaudible to all save the front ranks of the people. But his voice, with its mechanical aids, was loud enough, was heard by all. It was loud enough—yet had the quality of a faint, hopeless sigh. And the response of the people to his words was also a sighing, fainter still, yet penetrating, burdened with a tragedy such as the long, bloody ages of Man's history had never before known. The poet, the poor, incompetent rhymester who had come with Calvin, would have thought far more highly of his halting verses had he lived to hear, to know, the feeling with which they were infused on the occasions of this annual ceremony.

The Keeper of the Ship was not concerned with rhyme or rhythm, with that elusive, indefinable something called beauty. He was the Keeper of the Ship, the guardian of tradition, the warden of all that remained of the world that once men had called Home. Consciously histrionic, he spread his arms and intoned:

"And men were happy then, they say,
Could breath and drink their fill, and play
Through soft, warm night and cloudy day—"

"Long, long ago, and far away—" came the sighing response.

And some of the people turned their heads to look at the bright Morning Star, still visible even now, with the sun degrees above the horizon. An observer would have found it hard to see the expression on their faces; the transparency of their helmets reflected the light as they turned and stared towards the east. But a hopeless, helpless longing was evident in every line of their bodies. It was a longing for Paradise Lost—lost and never to be regained. Paradise that was, perhaps, all the more desirable for being only a legend, only a tale of a world that once was, handed down from father to son, down the exiled generations.

"But though men's feet were softly shod
And bright and fair the path they trod,
They lusted for the power of God—"

"Long, long ago, and far away—"

And Jennifer, pressing against her tall, dark, hungry-looking husband, whispered: "I often wonder if they were as happy as we're always told—"

Greg growled in reply: "They could at least be miserable in comfort!"

"From cloudless skies the rockets came,
The Cities withered in the flame—"

"Long, long ago, and far away—"

"The kindled blaze roared high and higher,
The Peoples perished in the fire—"

"Long, long ago, and far away—"

Greg said, not very softly: "Lucky buggers. They died warm!"

There were subdued cries of "Quiet!"

"The storm-rent air, the boiling sea
Burned, and there was no place to flee—"

"Long ago, and far away—"

Whispered Greg: "A nice, corny way of saying that there was a hydrogen atom chain reaction—"

"Please, Greg, be quiet," pleaded Jennifer. "You're spoiling it all—"

And Greg looked down at his wife's face, at the riot of blond curls confined in the transparent helmet—and at the suspicion of moisture in the eyes that returned his stare.

Poor kid, he thought, she takes this Mumbo Jumbo seriously. Then, bitterly, But what else is there? Long live the Human Race. We've got a great future behind us!

"But there was Calvin and his Ship

The Chosen Few to Make the Trip—"

"What a bloody pity there wasn't a real poet among 'em !"

"Greg ! Please!"

"Long, long ago, and far away—"

"On shafts of flame, on wings of light,

They lifted through the Judgment Night—"

"Long, long ago, and far away—"

"And we, among these deserts red—

"(The Ship is broken, Calvin dead.

The Secret lost, all Knowledge fled . . .)"

"Are here to stay, are here to stay..."

"And thank whatever gods there be that that's over for another year!" growled Greg gratefully. "There were giants in those days—sure. But we'd be better employed in trying to add a few inches to our own stature than in harking back to the past every Anniversary—and all the days between!"

Jennifer started to reply, but she was interrupted. It was a tall girl who had been standing next to them. She was fully as tall as Greg, and she was dark, and her face had a peculiarly silly kind of prettiness. It could have been the end result of generations of inbreeding. And—

"Isn't he awful, Jenny ?" she said.

"I don't know," replied Jennifer, rallying half-heartedly to the defense of her husband. "A lot of what Greg says is right. Perhaps we do waste too much time in hankering after the past. But"—and her sweeping gesture encompassed the sterile desert, the almost black sky with, in broad daylight, a few faint stars at the zenith, the humped, unlovely hemisphere of the city on the northern horizon "this is not Home. It never was. It never will be."

"And what would you give us instead, Greg?" demanded the short, dark man who was husband to the tall, dark girl.

"That!"

Greg pointed. He pointed to the east. Had the line of his outstretched arm been produced it would never have reached Earth, hanging ruddily in the dark sky a few degrees above the sun. It would have reached that other paler, fainter point of light below it.

"That!" said Greg again. "We still have the Ship, Warren. There are books in the Ship—although we are never allowed to see them. If her engines aren't in working order, it should not be hard, given the books, the tools, to put them right. And there, Warren, is air. A good, rich, thick atmosphere. And there's water. And there may be life, hostile—but it'll give us something better to fight than cold, and hunger, and slow asphyxiation. Because it's a losing battle. We all know that—it's a losing battle here on Mars. We run our compressors twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four to maintain a breathable atmosphere inside the dome. And when they break down—as they have broken down—the life of the entire race is in the hands of a few technicians. Just as our lives are in the hands of the gardener. We are utterly dependent upon his ability to cope with the mutating viruses that attack, time after time again, the carbon-dioxide-hungry weeds that are our air-conditioning plant. And the rest of us, working always in the fields, are fighting all the time. There are the virus diseases of our grain. There are the desert rats. There are our radiant heat projectors, and their continual drain on the power reserves of the community.

"And we can't develop. We can't get anywhere. It's a hand-to-mouth existence, and our culture is completely static—or, worse, retrogressive. The struggle for existence takes all our time."

"So it would there—" said Warren.

"Perhaps. For a generation, or two generations. We'd have to make ourselves safe against hostile life-forms. But we should not have to fight for every mouthful of water, every lungful of air—"

"Slow down a bit," said Warren. "Today's a holiday. We've earned it—the one holiday of all the year. We're in no hurry to get back to the stale, canned air of the city."

The four of them, the two men and the two girls, slackened their pace. The rest of the people overtook them, streamed past them. And in a short time the mile or so between themselves and the Ship was a mere, empty expanse of sand, and there was at least a quarter mile between them and the rearguard of the homeward hurrying citizens.

"Now we can talk," said Warren. His face, fat and dark inside the spherical transparency of his helmet, was that of some child in its comic seriousness. "Now we can talk." The simple words were transformed into a child's conspiratorial whisper. "You don't like the Council, Greg. Neither do I. Neither does Ruth, here. And you, Jennifer"

She replied, speaking slowly, weighing her words: "No. I don't. They made

my brother an outcast. They put him Outside with only the food in his pouch, only the air in his helmet tanks. And it was because he was seeking for the secret of atomic power—for light, and heat, and life for us all."

"And Death, maybe."

"What of it? A swift, clean death if the power gets out of hand again is better than this long, slow drift into racial senescence, into the age when we shall be no more than savages with distorted memories of the power and the glory that once were ours." She quoted bitterly:

" 'And though men's feet were softly shod,

And bright and fair the path they trod,

They lusted for the power of God—' "

"But they were Men."

"Sure, sure," Greg soothed her. "There were giants in those days!"

"So," mused Warren, "there's you, Greg, wants to push off for the stars again. There's Jenny a-hankering after the departed glories of the race. Ruth and me we're ag'in the government, too, just on principle, perhaps. But we feel that the Council is wrong in not letting us, and people like us, loose among the secrets of the Ship. It could mean so much in comfort, in a vastly higher standard of living. And if the experimenters should be careless, should start the same hydrogen atom chain reaction that wiped out Earth, well"—he grinned, and snapped his fingers—"there goes nothing."

"You say there are more of you snapped Greg. "Us—" he amended.

"Why, yes. Where have you been living ? There are at least fifty. And there are seven hundred people, of all ages, in the city. And there are twelve old fossils in the Council. Their police force numbers thirty-five. That leaves, say, six hundred innocent bystanders. Six hundred who will, perhaps, back the Council out of sheer force of habit. Six hundred who will swing their allegiance to anybody who will promise them better living conditions—"

Greg frowned. But the odds weren't too discouraging. He had managed, in what should have been his sleep periods, to study history—and he knew that a determined, ruthless minority, knowing what it wanted, had more than once seized power. At the time of the Reichstag fire the membership of the Nazi party had passed its peak—and, ranged against Communists, Catholics, Social Democrats, the Brown Shirts were greatly outnumbered. So, in 1917, were the Bolsheviki—

Ruth said, the steeliness of her voice belying the pretty vacuity of her face: "We want the Ship."

Said Warren, his face that of a very determined boy: "And you shall have it, my dear." And then, just before the four rebels overhauled the stragglers on the pathway through the slender-stalked, shoulder-high corn, the strip of human tillage along the bank of the immemorably old canal: "Don't forget. Tonight at seventeen hundred, at Ruth's apartment."

In the beginning, in the first few years after the coming of Man—not as a conqueror but as a fugitive—to Mars, the Anniversary had been a day of thanksgiving. The few survivors of the Atomic War were humble and grateful—although, perhaps, their very humbleness held a peculiar undertone of pride. For they had been spared. Out of all Earth's millions, they had been spared.

And their salvation had not been without its element of chance. Calvin—dimly foreseeing the results of the use of the new lithium hydride bombs—had built his Ship, his Ark. He had intended to save only those who would be of use in building a new civilization beyond the sky. But the war had come so quickly, had achieved utter dislocation of communications so incredibly fast, that, even before the beginning of the hydrogen atom disintegration, it had been impossible for him to man his Ship as he had desired. So it was that he had blasted off with a crew not of technicians and scientists, but of men and women picked at random from the hordes of refugees that were congesting all the roads from all the cities. There was even, among their number, a producer of verses for greeting cards.

He had been a kindly man, this Calvin. He had not had the heart to tell those whom he had snatched from the holocaust of what his real plans had been, of their miscarriage. Had he lived among them long, in the domed city that he, himself, had designed, it is probable that he would have told them. But he lived only two Martian years after the landing—the unexpectedly violent setting down that had seriously injured him, from which injuries he had never fully recovered, that had killed three women and four men among his passengers.

And so the people had lived on without Calvin, had lived and bred and fought a coldly hostile Nature for the bare essentials of existence. The seed grain that had been in Calvin's stores had flourished—after a fashion. It had grown tall and sickly, and with every passing year its yield was less. The turbogenerators that he had fashioned dragged a trickle of electric power from the sluggish, uncertain flow of the canal.

But the atomic power, the power unlimited that slumbered in the ship's engine room, they dare not touch. They were burnt children—Perhaps it was fear that prevented them from smashing the already damaged engines. But it was not fear that stopped them from burning the technical books. A man will go cleanshaven from adolescence to the grave—but offer him a safe, permanent depilatory and he will not dream of accepting it. He will not deliberately cut himself off from the power to grow a beard should he so desire. So it was with the Chosen People.

Yes—that is what they called themselves. But it was an empty sort of self-awarded honor. For all around them was the evidence that they were not the first, that another, older race had fought, with mighty weapons, the cold, the red dust sweeping in from the desert. The canals they had left—and Earth's survivors used but one of them. And ruins they had left—fantastically fretted towers that were uncovered as the dunes marched before the thin, insistent winds, that were covered again long before any thorough investigation could be made. And, in any case, there was no will to investigate.

Something had died in the people.

Something had died when Earth died. It was the urge to experiment, to explore, the lust of knowing what should not be known. Men were no longer "unwise and curiously planned." And until this time, generations after the landing, when the old, adventurous spirit of Man was making a reappearance, they were not men—

And so it was the people of the city watched the scratched old films, heard the old music, the old poetry, with mixed feelings. Some were there who regarded this display of the ancient arts as a peak from which the race had long since fallen, never to climb again. And there were some who saw only peril and ultimate doom in the work of the adventurous minds on this day displayed. It was adventure, curiosity, call it what you will, that had ended the world, had all but ended the race. And there were some, still a minority, to whom the pictures and the poetry, symphony and sonnet, were but a signpost pointing not to the past but to the future.

And to them, to this minority, the Anniversary was well worth while. It was more than a day's break from the endless, dreary routine of tillage and irrigation, of cold, bitter seed time and scanty harvest, of the unending struggle with the small, savagely cunning pests and the ever-drifting dunes. It was more than a holiday from the drudgery of eternal machine minding, from the toil of ever more frequent repairs made with worn out tools.

It was a vision of the glory to be. And when they met in Ruth's apartment some of the members of this minority bore on their faces the badge of their kind. It was Hope—and hope not altogether impossible, illogical.

Warren was there, with Ruth, and together they rode the tide of faith before it had time to ebb. He and the girl produced a bottle of the crude whiskey that was distilled, illegally but with the connivance of the Council, from the precious grain. Glasses and mugs were filled. Those present—there were twenty or so packed into the room—were about to drink, when Greg, stopped them. He raised his hand in a demand for silence. And he said:

"It's your whiskey, Warren. Or Ruth's. But I think that we should have a toast."

"A toast?" The little man's baby face was screwed into an expression of sullen impatience. It cleared, but the eyes were still sullen. "A toast? Very well then, Greg. You propose it."

Greg raised his glass. He looked at Jennifer. She said doubtfully: "There were giants—?"

"No! That's the past. We hear too much about the past. It's a weight dragging us down—but it should be wings to lift us. Wings." he repeated. "Wings. Here's my toast, Warren!

"New wings!"

Warren drained his glass. "So be it. And now—"

Ruth had opened a locker in the wall. She took out weapons—knives, clubs, a Tommy-gun. "One of the police was careless," she explained. "This was officially lost in the desert—"

"But what—?" began Greg.

"We're taking the Ship. We want you—or, rather, we want Jennifer. We knew that we couldn't have one without the other."

"Me?" gasped the girl.

"Yes, you. You were helping your brother with his experiments. It was only your age and sex that saved you from his fate. You'll be some use in the Ship's engine room."

"And why not?" shouted Greg. "Why not, Jenny? We've nothing to lose." He swept his arms upwards. "We have everything to gain!"

"Then you're with us? Good. Take your choice of weapons, Greg—a knife or a club? Hide it under your furs." Warren looked at the clock on the wall of the apartment. "Let's get going!" And he picked up the Tommy-gun, thrust it under his furs, arranged the heavy garments so as to give the maximum concealment.

"But—" Jennifer was stammering. "But—"

"But it's our chance!" shouted Greg. "Give her another whiskey, Ruth!"

The walls of the cells in the human beehive were soundproof. The uproar in Ruth's apartment had attracted no attention. If any muffled noises had drifted out into the corridor, they would, if heard by the patrol, be put down as coming from yet another drunken Anniversary party.

In any case, the corridor was deserted when the score of young people tumbled out through Ruth's door. Deserted, that is, until other doors opened and more young men and women joined Warren's party.

"It's all right," he explained to Greg and Jennifer. "They're all with us."

And so, along the corridors and down ramps, they made their way to the air lock. They attracted the notice of passers-by. They were the target for censorious glances. Had it not been the night of the Anniversary they would surely have been arrested.

But, unmolested, they reached the air lock.

The guard on duty was sullen. He sniffed audibly.

"Drinking!" he said. And: "What do you want?"

"Jusht a moonlight stroll, officer. Jusht a walk under the two luvverly moonsh. S'more than the poor old buggers had way back on. Earth—"

"So it's a moonlight stroll you want? I suppose you realize, young Warren, that every time I let anybody out we lose about a thousand cubic feet of air—"

"But it'sh Annivershary night, Bill ol' man." He assumed the cunning as well as the slurred diction of the drunkard. "An' we brought you your Annivershary drink."

A bottle changed hands.

"Oh, all right. Seeing that it's the Anniversary. You've all got your helmets: Let's see them on you all first. That's better. Now—into the chamber with you all!"

"That was easy," said Warren, as they all stood under and outside the huge dome that was the city. "That was easy. I hope the rest won't be too hard!"

Nor was it.

There were a half dozen guards on duty at the Ship—and they had not forgotten to pour into themselves their Anniversary libations. There was, it is true, some firing. Curiously thin and sharp, almost tinkling, the stammering song of the guards' automatic weapons was answered by the accurate bullets from Warren's gun. And there was a hand-to-hand struggle, and the last men alive found that Man was a fighting animal. The shifting light of the moons gleamed on uplifted knife, cast on to the sand the black shadow of upraised club. And black on the sand, briefly black on the thirsty sand, soaking down, evaporated, before it had time to freeze, was the first blood spilled in anger for generations.

And there was the fumbling at the air lock of the ship, the opening, at last, of the outer and inner doors, the discovery of the Keeper, an old man, drunk, sitting in the light and warmth of his alcohol lamp in what had been the captain's cabin. He fumbled in the captain's desk for the automatic pistol that was there. And Warren shot him.

Warren swung around to face his men—and women—still holding, carelessly, the smoking gun. His pudgy face was a killer's face, and his eyes were ablaze with fanaticism. The index finger of his right hand tightened on the trigger of his weapon. It seemed that it would tighten until he spat his stream of lethal lead at his followers.

But, and barely in time, it relaxed. "It was wonderful," said Warren. "To fight again, after all these centuries. To fight—and kill. It was—"

Greg cut in—his voice cold water upon a hot body.

"What now, Warren?"

"What now? What—" The blood-drunken face sobered. The feral light died in the eyes. "Oh, yes. The engine room. Jenny, will you go down to the engine room? It's right aft, I think. See if you can get things fixed, will you?"

Greg went down with her. Greg and two or three more of the raiding party. And they looked, uncomprehending, at the mechanical complexity that was there displayed. For, all except Jennifer, were agriculturalists and knew machinery only as it affected their well-being, only as a noise in the

background whose sudden cessation could mean discomfort or even danger.

But the girl was one of the machine minders of the city. She had worked on the few, poor machines that were the heart and lungs of the city. She had read the books—both those essential to her job and those that had been smuggled by somebody from the Ship to the city. And there was no real complexity. From the viewpoint of everyday mechanics the most complicated thing there was the little Diesel generator that supplied emergency light and power. Its fuel tank was full, as was the tank of the even smaller petrol motor that would start the Diesel job. As for the rest—it was straightforward atomic power and reaction drive. Mechanically—it could all have been constructed by a reasonably competent plumber. And, after years of intensive study, a genius would have been able to grasp the mathematics of it all.

Jennifer swung over the starting handle of the petrol motor. The machine coughed once or twice, it barked—and it started. Then the Diesel took hold. Automatically the petrol motor cut out. All through the ship the lights came on. There was a clatter as Greg dropped his electric torch to the deck. He said, in a tone of great conviction:

"I shan't be needing this again."

There was the sound of heavily shod feet scrambling down the ladder from aloft. It was Warren. He burst into the compartment.

"Ready?" he cried. "Ready?"

"No," replied Jennifer quietly. "No. Not yet." She was pulling down from their lockers piles of old books, was poring over them with a puzzled furrow between her eyes.

Warren said abruptly: "Just as well. I've work to do yet. And don't turn anything loose without giving me warning. I shall be under the drive."

"Under the drive?"

"Yes. Of course. There'll be the relief guards out from the city at any time—and we may as well take advantage of the cover of the vanes."

"Wouldn't you be safer inside—?" began Greg.

But the other was gone, clattering up the ladder.

And Jennifer said, that worried frown intensified: "I don't trust him—"

But, in her work, she soon forgot her distrust of Warren. Greg could not forget what she said, however, for he could not long maintain an interest in the unintelligible things that she was doing, and his mind was free to wander. He had the Ship—but, in his dreams, possession of the Ship had not entailed this turning of wheels and adjustment of levers, the ends of whose spindles and shafts were out of sight behind thick screens. The muttered talk of critical mass, of controlled chain reaction, rang but faint bells in his mind. He was bored, and he was worried.

Warren, or his like, had never been featured in the mad, splendid dreams about the Ship.

He said, curtly, "I'm going up top."

He climbed the long ladders from the engine room, passed through storerooms and accommodation, through the captain's quarters in which the Keeper of the Ship lay sprawled in untidy and ungainly death. He found his way into Control. He sat in the seat before the big bank of switches and levers and instruments of all kinds. The soft padding yielded to the curves of his body. He was at home.

And everything, gauges and meters and controls, was neatly labeled. And there were books a-plenty, and the mathematics in them was not the esoteric probing into the secrets of matter and energy with which Jennifer was having to cope. It made sense, even to his relatively untutored mind. And there were the ephemerae with the aid of which Calvin had navigated the ship from Earth to Mars. They, now, would be useless. But it didn't matter. If all went well below, he would have unlimited power under his feet. Venus was too bright, too conspicuous, to miss. And this ship of Calvin's was not one of the early experimental rockets, dependent for its drive upon a limited supply of chemical fuel.

Hesitantly at first, then with increasing confidence, he checked his meters and gauges. Acceleration—Zero. Air Pressure—One Atmosphere. I don't need this any more, he thought, and removed his helmet, threw it carelessly to the deck. Water—Ten Tons. Not much—but the Ship in flight, in Space, provided that her purifier worked, would be a closed economy. Food —But there was, of course, no gauge or meter for that, He had heard somewhere that none of the provisions remaining in the Ship at her landing had been used, that her storerooms had always been regarded by the Council as a handy reserve against time of famine. He hoped that this was so.

There was a telephone before him. He picked it up, moved the selector switch to ENGINE ROOM. He turned the handle rapidly, heard the high pitched calling squeal.

"Captain to Chief Engineer," he said, as soon as he heard the instrument at the other end being lifted from its rest. He did not have to try very hard to make his voice sound important. "Captain to Chief Engineer. How long before I can have power?"

Jennifer's voice, when she answered, was frightened. "Captain?" she gasped. "Cap . . . ?" Then— "Oh, it's you. I thought— For a moment I thought— But it doesn't matter. I'll have power for you in a few minutes now."

A few minutes—

Greg's hands went out, with a caressing motion, to the control bank before him.

A few minutes—

He forced himself to relax, to sink back into the soft, resilient padding of the chair. He looked out through the big viewports, to the dark desert, at the creeping black shadows of the dunes cast by the shifting light of the moons. He looked to the lights of the city, to the north. And he saw, midway, between Ship and city, the string of tiny sparks, twisting, turning, ever approaching, that was the electric torches of the relief guard. He thought: I'm high. I'll be seeing these before Warren will. I'd better warn him.

He picked up the telephone, put through a call to the air lock. There was nobody there. He frowned, forgetting for the moment that he was not yet—perhaps never would be captain of the Ship in actuality. Reluctantly, he heaved himself out of his seat, put on the helmet that he had discarded and began the descent of the long ladders.

The inner door opened to his touch, closed behind him. He did not wait for pressure to equalize before opening the outer door. The rush of rapidly expanding air almost blew him out through the doorway. But he kept his feet, swung himself out, scrambled rapidly down the ladder.

Warren and his people—about a dozen of them—were busy. They had scooped a big hollow under the ship, between the vanes, directly under the orifice of the main drive. At first Greg, remembering his historical reading, thought that this was a foxhole, a trench, from which the rebels would fight off the guard. But he was puzzled when he saw the gleam of moonlight on cans, fertilizer cans, that were being stacked in the hollow.

He started forward, a question ready on his lips, the real purpose of his leaving the Ship forgotten. A dark figure detached itself from the main body of the workers, came to meet him. As it got closer he saw that it was Ruth.

"Who is it?" she shouted, her voice thin in the thin air. "What do you want?"

"It's me, Greg. What—?"

Ruth was up to him now, was pressing against him. Their helmets were almost touching. She spoke in a tense whisper.

"I can't go on with it. I can't, I tell you! You'll have to stop them!"

"Who? What?"

"Warren. The Sons of the judgment—"

"The Sons—",

"Yes. You must stop them. Now." She quoted a verse of poetry:

"Our fathers sinned, they did not stay

To face the fires of Judgment Day,

We pay the debt they did not pay—

Long, long ago, and far away—"

Her voice took on a note of pride. "That is our ending to the Anniversary Hymn. I wrote it."

"What is this nonsense?" demanded the man.

"It's not nonsense. Do you know what's in those cans? Do you? Do you?"

Her voice was becoming hysterical. Greg took hold of her and shook her. Had it not been for her helmet he would have slapped her face.

"What is in them, then?"

"Warren is more than our leader. He is our chemist. And, in charge of the fertilizer plant, he has been able to make far more than chemical manures. He has made"—and her voice dropped again to a tense whisper—"lithium hydride."

Greg shuddered.

Lithium hydride—the ultimate in atomic explosives. Lithium hydride—awaiting only the solar heat of the primer. Lithium hydride—and the hydrogen atom chain reaction that would follow upon its detonation, spreading through the hydrides and hydrates in the sand, flashing along the blazing waters of the canals. And the primer? The trickle of power that would come from the jets of the Ship when Jennifer warmed up the drive.

He turned away from Ruth, from the frightened, defiant face of the girl. He looked up at the Ship, and the gleaming, metallic tower that was a finger pointing the way to the stars, that was an arm reaching out for the stars. He looked at the stacked cans beneath her drive, dull-gleaming, innocent seeming, the last word in deadliness. And he knew, without more than the merest smattering of chemistry or physics, that the Ship could never survive the blast.

The death of the Ship would be worse than the death of a world. The clean, fiery death that would flash over Mars would be no more than the anticipation of the inevitable, no more than a hastening of the coming of the doom into which the senile planet was slowly and surely falling.

But with the Ship would go Hope.

The girl was carrying a Tommy-gun. He snatched it from her. For a few seconds they struggled in the shadow of the Ship. She had wanted him to save a world, to save the Ship and the race, to save her own life—but, with the curious illogic of the female, she had thought that it could be accomplished without harm to her lover.

Greg, realizing that this was the only way, struck Ruth across the chest with the butt of the gun. She sank to the ground, moaning. Then she started to scream. But her cries, muffled by her helmet, thin in the thin air, were not heard by Warren and his party.

Greg left her huddled on the sand. He strode toward the shadowy figures still working in the shadow of the vanes. He shouted: "I've got you covered."

Get that stuff away from under the Ship!"

Warren heard. The men and women with him heard. Cans dropped upon cans with a dull clatter. Weapons were snatched up. The brittle music of the guns was Warren's requiem. But Warren was only one of many.

It was a good fight while it lasted: Men—and women—learned anew the value of cover, the art of concealment. For a while it was hide and seek around the great vanes. Greg, in a perverse kind of way, was enjoying it. He enjoyed it until he found that, when he snatched the gun from Ruth, he had not thought to take any spare ammunition or box magazines that she might have had on her person.

He had fixed his last burst, and he was only a hundred feet from the foot of the ladder running up to the air lock. He thought that he might make it without being more than wounded. He doubted that he would be able to get up the ladder. But he would have to try. The vane behind which he was crouching gave him protection from one side only. A cautious muzzle poked around the edge of the vane that he was facing, and a badly aimed burst left streaks of silvery lead all along the hard metal of the one at his back.

He tensed himself for the dash.

He was about to spring—then dropped suddenly to his face. The warning that he had left the Ship to give had never been given, the relief guards were here. Greg, taking his attention momentarily from the grim game being played around the Ship, had seen, in time, the flashing of torches behind the dunes, the glint of moonlight on metal. He thought, too, that he heard the order to fire given—but in that he may have been mistaken. But he dropped to his face. And, from all sides, the leaden hail drove in upon the Ship.

His enemies dropped too—but they dropped too late.

From all sides the guards converged upon the ship. They found the bodies of their comrades. They found the bodies of Warren and his people. One was not yet dead, was threshing the sand with feeble arms. The police officer gave a sharp order. And a knife flashed up, and then down.

Greg's intention had been to get to his feet, to explain the circumstances to the police. But now he dared not. And he lay there and sweated. He was badly frightened—not so much for himself as for his dream.

Somebody, a woman, was calling from the air lock.

"Warren! Warren!" Then: "Greg! Greg!"

Guns were leveled, but not fired.

The officer shouted: "Not so fast, there. We have to take some prisoners. The Council must have somebody alive to help get to the bottom of this mess!"

"Ruth!," shouted Greg. "Shut that door. Tell Jenny to turn on the drive after thirty minutes unless I tell her not to! I'll hammer on the door if I want to get in. Make sure it is me—and alone!"

"Get that man!" bellowed the officer. "Alive, you fools!"

Greg got to his feet.

He called: "Here I am. And you'd better handle me with kid gloves."

The officer swaggered up, his gun at the ready.

"We'll handle you with kid gloves, all right. But you'll be going out into the desert with only the air in your helmet tanks, the food in your pouch. You and your pals inside the Ship."

"Shall we?" asked Greg. His voice was mildly incredulous. "Shall we?"

And all the time he was in a cold sweat of fear. He had realized, a second after his shouted orders to Ruth, what would happen if this uniformed braggart refused to play. He saw himself being hauled back to the city, the licking tongue of incandescence from the drive, the end of the Ship, the end of a world, the end of Man.

And the end of Jennifer.

"Take him away," ordered the officer.

"Wait!"

The policemen hesitated.

"You know what will happen if you do, don't you? All of you can never hope to get those cans away to a safe distance inside of thirty minutes. And if I'm not back in the Ship—"

"What?"

"There's lithium hydride in those cans. Oh, yes, I might be bluffing. But you can't afford to call my bluff. You know what's going to happen if I'm right, don't you? It happened there!"

Greg pointed to the east. Earth, a lurid warning, was just rising.

"Take him away," said the officer.

There was a brief rattle of fire. The officer seemed to collapse in sections knees, hips, shoulders, neck. He crumpled to the sand. And the man holding the smoking gun said: "I never did like him. And I've a wife and two kids in the city."

"He was killed in the fighting," said another. "Wasn't he, boys?"

And a third to Greg: "Is it right what you're telling us?"

Before he could reply the first man broke in.

"But him and his mates murdered our pals!"

"There're your murderers!" shouted Greg, pointing. "There's Warren—and I shot him myself. Why do you think I was fighting them when you came up?"

Isn't it obvious that I was on your side?"

"Something in what he says—" grumbled somebody.

"You're boss," admitted the man who had shot the officer. "What do you want us to do?"

"Get these cans shifted. At least half a mile away. And every one of them. And when you're finished —one of you can wave to the Ship. If it's not light—wave a torch."

"And where will you be?"

"Inside the Ship."

"But—"

"We'll have to let him go," admitted the second man. "We've got to. Otherwise—"

"But I don't like it," grumbled the first man.

"Neither do I—but he's got us by the short hairs. All right, you, get up that ladder!"

And when Greg was hammering at the air lock door he heard somebody shouting.

"What are you doing with the Ship?" drifted up the voice. "Where are you going?"

"There!" bawled Greg. "There!"

He waved with his free hand towards Venus, climbing in the wake of ruddy Earth.

"There!"

"Can I come with you?"

"But you've a wife and two kids," shouted somebody. "You said it!"

"I know. And Mars is too small to get away from 'em." He called again to Greg. "Can I come?"

"Yes! Anybody else?"

But there was nobody.

And Ruth opened the door to Greg, and then the man who shot the officer, the man with the family, followed him up the ladder, and then the door was shut for the last time.

The remaining policemen worked frantically in the cold dawn, lugging can after deadly can away from the field of the main drive.

"They're waving!" said Ruth.

"I see." Then, into the telephone, "Are you ready, Jenny?"

"Have been for hours!"

"Then— Stand by."

Greg depressed the firing key. A giant hit him, slapped him back and down into his chair. Dimly, through his mental blackout, he heard cries and screams from the body of the Ship. Slowly his sight cleared. He could see, mistily, his own hand before him, the bank of controls. Fighting hard for every fraction of an inch he moved the key up a notch, another notch, another.

The rate of acceleration dropped. Greg snatched the telephone from its cradle, turned the handle furiously.

"Jenny, Jenny! Are you all right?"

Faint and tremulous came the answer "Chief Engineer to captain. Badly shaken aft. No bones broken."

Ruth, climbing slowly to her feet from the quivering deck, screamed: "We've done it!" Then:

"But we shall find new wings, we know,

Climb to some world where rivers flow,

Where skies are gray, sea breezes blow—

Some day, some day, and far away—"

Greg winced.

But all that he said was: "No, not 'some day.' Now."

And, into the telephone: "Thank you for my new wings, darling." And to himself: "Now I've got to learn to use 'em!"

THE END